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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses issues relevant to international development programming, particularly with reference to distance education programming in indigenous communities of the Canadian north. A major issue in international programming is the role of the community. Without the participation of indigenous peoples as partners in program design and implementation, conventional management models will not succeed. Partnerships in the development and management of international projects allow each partner to contribute to the project's value and sustainability and broaden the knowledge base on which techniques, process, and results are built. The points are the same for distance-education teacher education in remote communities: the participation of local indigenous people ensures respect for their knowledge systems and promotes the sustainability of the educational endeavor. A community focus increases understanding of situational realities at different levels in a distance-education system. Community interactions at local, regional, national, and international levels must be analyzed, accommodated, and incorporated into planning and implementation. A focus on community will also ensure flexibility in delivery methods to suit local circumstances. Examples of distance education projects in northern Canada and in Ghana illustrate the need to analyze community involvement and the levels and types of relationships within programs. (SV)

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Thoughts on the Theory of Community and Distance-Education: The Significance for Maintenance and Sustainability of Development Programs

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to address a number of issues currently relevant to international development particularly to teacher training via distance-education: sustainability, the role of communities, the meaning of the concept of community, and the different levels of relations within a distance-education program. The thoughts included are not exclusive to distance-education programming. They can be relevant in any international development context.

The Role of Community in Our Thinking

A major issue in international programming is the role of the community. For distance educators who train teachers to understand the local context in which distance-education training takes place is of paramount importance.

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In an attempt to emphasize a point about community-based education, and by no means intending to denigrate pedagogical theory, I would like to draw at first from academic theories about sustainable development, about renewable resource management, about notions of common property management, and about the role of indigenous peoples' in those endeavours. The main theoretical points, certainly not exclusive to this domain of thought, are that without the participation of indigenous peoples as partners in design (planning, policy making, and so on) and implementation, and without respect for indigenous knowledge systems, conventional management models have not done the job they were expected to do (see e.g., Freeman and Carbyn, 1988, Young, 1988).

We are discovering that successful management and development programs do not come easily. Some promise is held in the concept of "sustainable development" as introduced by the Brundtland Report (Our Common Future, 1987). Robinson (this volume) sums up the concept this way:

> At its roots this literature champions self-reliance, local control, a grassroots-up methodological approach and a growing disdain for the specialized services of experts. It is also mindful of environmental stewardship, the contributions of land-based traditional economies and concerns itself philosophically with the pursuit of the well-lived life.

Two ideas are important throughout. The first is that partnerships and participation in development and management of international projects are necessary because each of the partners has something to offer that will enable a project to increase in value and in sustainability. This idea addresses problems of ownership and control of projects. The second point is that the combined knowledge of each of the partners can broaden the base on which techniques, process and results are built.

The points are the same when it comes to distance-education teacher training in remote communities: without the participation of indigenous (local) people as partners in education, their knowledge systems cannot be appropriately respected and the sustainability of the educational endeavour may be jeopardized. Without intimate management partnerships, without addressing issues of control at all levels, and without relationships entailing trust and respect, the hope that education may assist with sustainable economic and human resource growth also must be diminished.

Pelton (1991:5) makes this simple comment about the distance education process, "Local people cannot be eliminated without a negative impact."

Relationships within the Distance-Education System

While the focus on community does not prescribe the level at which the analysis should take place, it does help us come to terms with the situational realities at different levels in a distance-education system.

There can be a good deal of confusion about what the concept "community" actually means. One unusual example of a community is the trade unions in Britain which participate in a distance education program described by Spencer (1990). He suggests that distance education projects have increased the cohesiveness of that particular community of labour organizations.

For the purposes of this discussion "community" is perhaps best understood as a social system about which boundaries can be described because of the integrated and cohesive organization among its components and because of the relations between the system and its environment. Such a definition allows the notion of community to be tagged to any sized social system and provides a considerable range of flexibility when we, distance-educators, come to assess what it is we are talking about.

As a point of departure, the focus on communities in sustainable and participatory development immediately draws our attention to relationships within the educational process, especially those between students (and the community in which they live) and the distance-education program.

Haughey (this volume) at the very least opens a discussion of the relationship between adult learners and the distance-education system. She emphasizes the need for a greater awareness about adult learners and their communities when she states that as distance educators ". . . we have to recognize their historical and political context, their gender and ethnicity." She goes on to say:

> Cultural values and ways of knowing also need to be seriously considered in determining the role of the student in distance delivered courses . . .

There are a number of levels of community that can be considered in distance-education. At each of these there will be relationships that need to be described, accommodated, incorporated into planning, development, and implementation. These can include local, regional, national and international levels of interaction. Each can be analysed separately, of course, recognizing that the overall context has influences on the relations being considered.

One of the levels we can talk about is the community close to the student. We can assess the influences of various social groups on students or we can assess the students' relations with the education system. For example, what role do students play in evaluation of the program, or in the development of resources, or in the knowledge that students and teachers work with.

Addressing this level of relationship from a theoretical perspective, Haughey (this volume) speaks about the knowledge systems of students.

> Knowledge is not out there, given, transferred from teacher to learner but is constructed by the learner as he or she attempts to make sense of the situation and give it meaning. We also now recognize the important influence of prior experience in this process. It is not enough to design instruction in which learners are told what they need to know; we now have to include more opportunities for learners to graft what they are learning to their own experience and also opportunities where they bring forward that experience for scrutiny and possible change. We have to recognize what learners already know, and also reconsider whose knowledge is of most worth.

We can also talk about regional relationships for example between central administrations and regional centres or between regional centres and tutors. We can analyse communities and relationships at the national and international levels for example by focusing on the relationships between international aid organizations and national departments of education. What becomes the focus of any analysis will be dictated in part by the actual situation under investigation. The ways of describing specific relations and issues will be very much dependent on the national context.

Planning and Structuring the System

Of course, it is virtually impossible to know all the influences on students and distance-education programs. We have to be open in the delivery of distance-education programs to the unexpected. It is such openness, underscored by goodwill, good faith, and flexibility that will make our distance-education programs optimally successful and maintainable.

One of the points Sharpe (this volume) makes in describing a teacher training distance delivered program is that flexibility in delivery methods is necessary to account for the peculiar circumstances of the students such as the hours of work of the students and the social commitments they have as mature adults in their communities. There are also a variety of motivational and learning style factors that must be accounted for. He also describes regional issues such as

the difficulties posed by remote terrain, unexpected storms, few roads, and lack of communications facilities. It becomes very difficult for external 'experts' to understand many of these factors without partnerships with people who understand these factors as a result of their lived experiences.

Possibly by structuring the distance-education system to accommodate optimal relationships, partnerships, between students and teachers, in fact all the way through the system, eventually innovative ways can be developed that account for problems encountered and thus promote the maintenance and sustainability of the educational endeavour.

That said, let me turn to examples of distance education projects in northern and remote communities which illustrate the need to analyse community involvement and the levels and types of relationships within programs.

Examples of Community-Based Distance-Education Projects

This section will describe how examples of distance-education projects handle the issue of community involvement and at what levels in the system this is done. The first examples mentioned are of distance-education programs not dealing with teacher training. The second group are specifically oriented to teacher training programs.

A practical example that addresses the relationship between the student's local community and the distance-education system is Contact North in northwestern Ontario. Anderson (1991) emphasizes the close relationship between Contact North and the local communities. He mentions the particular importance of local co-ordinators who act as counsellors and contacts between the student and the distance-education system. He emphasizes the need for community facilities in which students can feel at home. Here the role of the local community and its relationship to this distance-education project is being explored and becoming clearer. In a second paper, Anderson (this volume) addresses another level of relationship, that is the relationship between the administration of Contact North and the University administrations served by the Project. He discusses in particular the struggle to position the project as a co-ordinating body for distance-education development and delivery to Northwestern Ontario.

The second example, is a proposal for a distance education literacy program delivered to a community in northern Alberta. This proposal is important to the discussion here because of the unconventional concepts used to build the proposal. The unconventional approach is informed by the commitment to

forge a strong and sustainable relationship between the educational system and the local community of the students. Initially, it was a member of the community who, with others, developed and promoted the proposal and sought funding (Larsen, this volume).

To illustrate the local community focus of the program, let me list just some of the approaches taken in the proposal:

1. that course content be related to the local community
2. that the local community provide the tutor
3. that courses be directed toward the cultural and economic development in the local community
4. that courses build on the students' skills and knowledge
5. that learning resources and curricula be developed with the community in mind.

Larsen states this approach was intended "... to actively respect the integrity and aspirations of the community and the wisdom, skills and knowledge of its residents."

With regard to curriculum development, she states

> ... the curriculum is developed in consort with the learners as learning progresses. This approach to curriculum development
> 1. provides considerable flexibility in attending to the diversity of learning needs typically found in adult groups,
> 2. gives credence to the belief that adult learners have much to contribute to their own learning, and
> 3. assures, in an on-going way, that what is learned and how it is learned is meaningful to the learner.

The role of the instructor can be reassessed in this context. The instructor becomes a learning facilitator whose task it is to support and guide the learner instead of leading and directing the learner. Instructors lead from behind so that their involvement in the adult student's learning decreases as the latter's skills and know-how increase.

The first example of distance-education teacher training programs is a proposal for a native teacher training program in Alberta. The central theme of the proposal (Alberta Advanced Education, 1989) is the relationship between the local community of the student and the distance-education teacher training system. This is the only level of analysis in this proposal; however, it is particularly interesting because of the thorough attempt to address that level.

The proposal suggests that native (aboriginal) teacher training must be community-based to be efficient and effective. In other words, the teacher training program to be feasible and fruitful must account for the social context within which the student lives. The authors go on to suggest that student teachers must work with professionals, teachers and other resource people (with whom they already live and interact) who would be their tutors, counsellors, and colleagues; local elders would be part of the cultural learning process and support network for students; local people would be involved in the selection of candidates.

In yet another example, Sharpe (this volume) describes a distance teacher training program delivered from Memorial University to Innu and Montagnais teachers who are already active teachers in their remote communities in Labrador but who because of a previous short-term training program now need further training and legitimate certification.

It can be seen that in a very practical way the local communities of the students do affect the delivery of distance-education programming. Sharpe shows that the scheduling of courses must account for local school times, church meetings, and other community activities such as fishing or hunting. He says this is "(a) seemingly, small issue, but one that could change course outcomes for the better." Sharpe also indicates that the predominant language of the community and the students is an important factor to be considered in program delivery. Of the two groups of aboriginal peoples involved in the Memorial University—Labrador teacher education program, the Innu students require translators and the courses, therefore, need to be designed to offer more face-to-face interaction. Sharpe suggests the administration of the program has to be flexible enough to test different approaches such as the use of tutors, the length of courses offered, the location of courses, combinations of course delivery methods and the support facilities needed by the students—local counselling, local master teachers, local day care facilities, local communications facilities. At the same time another level, the university regulations and procedures, needs to be accounted for.

And finally, Ansere (1989) describes a modular distance-education teacher training program in Ghana. Administratively the Modular program comes under the Teacher Education Division of Ghana Education Services. A major problem is that the Modul Staff cannot take their own final decisions. This slows decision-making. This point of focus for Ansere is the relations at the national level of the distance education system. The author refers to the Open University and the National Teacher Institute which appear to have solved this particular problem by setting up regional and district offices. Speaking about the relations at an international level, between external aid organizations and

the national distance education system, Ansere suggests the program is too dependent on external aid. He says there is a great need for a reassessment of the relationship to develop better arrangements to involve local staff. Most of the work is being done by external staff not by indigenous staff, he suggests. Ansere (Ibid:224) states that "(t)he solution to this problem is to find local personnel who have the requisite attitude and capacity and make them understudies to the foreign experts."

These examples illustrate that in each is an implicit understanding of the levels of interaction that must be analysed. I think that such analyses must be more consciously and clearly described. As distance-educators we need to come to terms with the precise level of analysis required and we must clearly identify the relevant interactions between levels of analysis. Such analyses should be directed at helping sustain and maintain a flexible system of distance-education programming.

Conclusion

Mutual influence, respect, trust, caring, and goodwill are characteristics to be strived for in innovative indigenous educational situations in North America; indeed, the role of the community and the role of the school within the community has been a significant point of departure in discussions about education.

Those who design teacher training programs cannot hope to get terribly far without a partnership in development and implementation with those who are students and the hosts of the program. Only the hosts, be they national representatives, regional representatives, community (settlement) representatives, can know the realities of their social (kinship, language, spiritual, and so on), economic and political situations. Whether or not a distance-education program is connected or grounded to the everyday activity of the hosts very much influences the success of a project.

We require a reorientation from universal models to a critical awareness of local contexts. The main needs are for community ownership, involvement, and participation in the development projects. These ideas have gained a good deal of acceptance over perhaps the past 10 years, with the growing awareness that planning, implementation, and maintenance without the integrated participation of community, or indigenous knowledge systems essentially are doomed to failure when the 'experts' leave.

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Teacher training then should be intimately and securely related to the community in which the student-teacher learns. Distance education while providing access to those who might not otherwise have had an opportunity to become teachers, also provides an opportunity to assist in sustainable human resource and economic development. It affords an opportunity NOT to force change on a community from outside but an opportunity to create with mutual respect a system of education that can meet, to the greatest possible extent cultural, economic, spiritual and environmental needs. But this can only be done with political will and goodwill. The balance between mutual respect and asymmetrical control is delicate and distance educators have to be aware of this and act to maintain mutuality.

In the end the important understandings about distance-education initiatives and about the levels of relationship in programs may be these:

1. That distance educators are not operating in a vacuum into which students and local, regional, or national communities are pulled.

2. That the variety of levels in a distance-education system must be clearly described and understood.

3. That the participation of students and communities in the distance-education process is fundamental to success.

4. That the knowledge systems of indigenous peoples must be respected and will inform distance educators in what they do.

5. That the delicate balance between the unilateral power to structure and mutual respect in education requires ethical guidelines to maintain, and a great deal of caring and goodwill.

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